

Report on International Election Observation Program - 2024 Parliamentary Elections of the Republic of Maldives

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the International Election Observation Program (IEOP) for the Parliamentary Election of the Republic of Maldives, held from 19th to 22nd April, 2024. The international delegations from the following countries had participated in the IEOP organized by Election Commission of Maldives (ECM):

1. Dr. S.Y. Quraishi, former Chief Election Commissioner of India as the Chief International Observer;
2. Russia;
3. Georgia;
4. Thailand;
5. Philippines;
6. Cambodia;
7. Azerbaijan;
8. Türkiye; and
9. Bhutan.

Objectives

The ECM extended an invitation for an election observation program with the objectives of enhancing democratic and governance capacities of participants and promoting global democratic development. Furthermore, it sought to foster collaboration and knowledge-exchange among election management bodies.

Observational Methodology

The international observers followed a comprehensive methodology that included:

1. Pre-election Assessment: Briefing Session by the ECM and distribution of observers into four different groups.
2. Election Day Monitoring: Monitoring of polling stations and evaluation of voting procedures by members of the respective groups.
3. De-briefing by the ECM on the elections conducted, election results and feedback by the International Observers.

4. Post-Election Analysis: Observation of handing-taking over of the election materials collected from polling stations at the center, and verification of election results.

Overview of the election observation

Day 1: 19th of April 2024

The delegation was received by officials from the Election Commission of Maldives (ECM) at Velana International Airport. In the evening of the day of arrival, the ECM conducted a briefing session for all 19 international delegates from the 9 countries. The session began with welcoming remarks by the Chairman of the ECM, Mr. Fuwad Thowfeek. After the welcome remarks, ECM officials provided a brief introduction to the 2024 Parliamentary Election. An official video, detailing the electoral proceedings, was also played to ease the understanding among the International Observers of the electoral process of Maldives.

At the end of the briefing session, the Commission presented each delegate with a token of appreciation. The briefing session was followed by a dinner with traditional music, hosted by the ECM.



Figure 2: Opening remarks from Chairperson

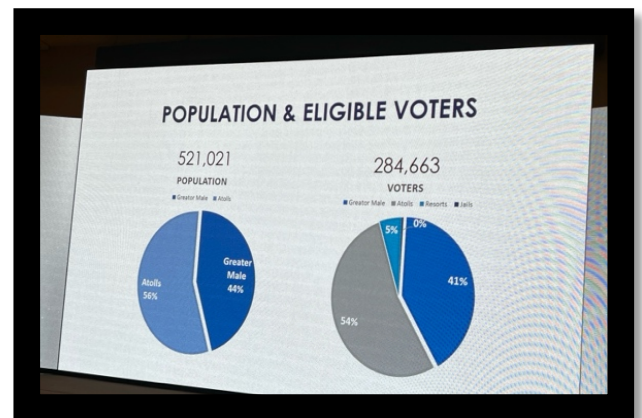


Figure 1:PPT from ECM

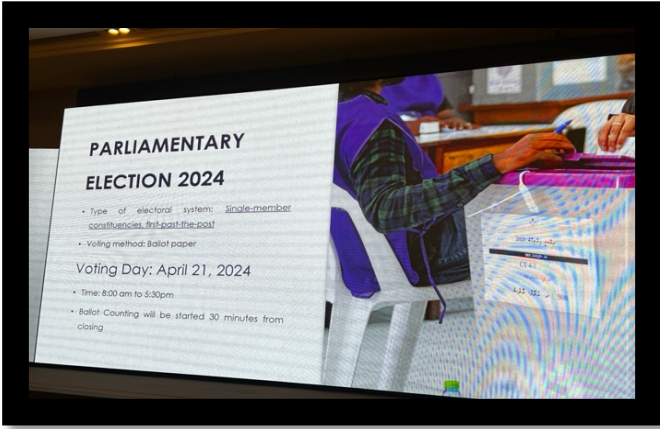


Figure 3:PPT from ECM



Figure 4: Participants during Briefing session



Figure 5;International observers for Election

Day 2: 20th of April 2024

The ECM set aside day two for an excursion for all the International Observers. First, the Observers visited the Islamic Centre and the Museum located within the city of Male. Thereafter they were taken for a short bus trip around the city.



Figure 6: Excursion to National Museum

Day 3: 21st of April 2024

General observation

1. Registered voters:284,663
2. No. of Constituencies: 93
3. Total polling stations: 602
4. Voter turnout: 215657 (109103 M & 106554 F)
5. Voter Turnout Percentage: 75.76%

The observers had a long day on Polling Day, as we started our journey at 7 AM from the Crossroad Maldives to Malé. The observers, divided into four respective groups, were accompanied by a protocol officer each designated for a country, along with security personnel. Our group comprised delegates from Russia, Türkiye, and Bhutan.

The team began its observations at Majeediyya School, a government school in the capital of Maldives, Malé, followed by visits to a few polling stations including the one at Hulhumale Jail where the polling booth was arranged for prisoners and officials on duty). Further, observation was also made at Vilimale, an isolated Island, located about 10 minutes boat-ride from the Male city.

It was observed that a polling station had more than one multiple polling booths, each staffed by a minimum of 9 officials, depending on the number of registered voters. Each polling booth served a baseline of 500 registered voters.

On Polling Day, the following observations were made:

1. Voting commenced at 8 AM and closed at 5 PM.
2. All designated polling officials were present at all polling stations; necessary voting materials were available; and ballot papers were counted at all the polling stations.
3. The opening of the polls was smooth, all administrative preparations were well-organized.
4. Candidate representatives and party observers were present at the polling stations to monitor/observe the proceedings.

5. Voters were found to be disciplined while waiting in the polling booths and taking their turns to cast ballots.
6. Security personnel of the Maldives Police Service (MPS) were stationed outside the polling stations.
7. Voters' queues were managed efficiently.
8. Secrecy of ballots was well-ensured at the polling booths.



Figure 7: Polling Procedure on the Poll Day





Figure 8: Close of Poll and Coordination Center



Day 4: 22nd April 2024

The De-Briefing Session to delegation was chaired by chairman of Election Commission of Maldives. The Chairman thanked all international observer for observing the election in Maldives. The Chief Observer, Dr. S.Y. Quraishi applauded ECM for successfully conducting Parliamentary Election and further the other observers also added and congratulate ECM for their hard work. Following the debriefing session, the observers met with the press, engaging with various media.



Figure 9: Debriefing session, meeting with Media houses and observing Post Poll activities

Polling process

On the positive note, some of the critical observations that drew the attention of the International Observers were:

- During the polling process, voter's slips were collected and stacked in such a manner that there was no risk of slips getting misplaced or blown away by the wind.
- The identification of polling station visitors (international, local officials, candidate's representatives and party observers) was enhanced through an Application (Aps) installed in the mobile phones of the polling officials. The feature in the App scanned the cards held by the visitors and generated their detailed information and pictures, enhancing efficiency and effectiveness recognition of the visitor.
- Electoral Roll Search System Voter could be reintroduced and a voter list without image can substitute the E-Roll for cost reduction.
- Different coloured highlighters were used to mark male and female voters in the voter list. This was useful in easily segregating male and female voter turnout.
- The indelible ink in the form of marker pen was found to be extremely useful as it prevented the ink from spilling or smudging on papers or other surfaces, which could have been the case if the bottled indelible ink was used.

Election Officials

The following arrangements made by the ECM were commendable and worth appreciating:

1. Polling officials were recruited mostly from the private sector on a voluntary basis;
2. Generally, it was observed that majority of the polling officials were women;
3. Hi-vis clothing (half jacket) worn by the polling officials on the poll day provided easy recognition of such officials by the visitors at the polling stations and their vicinity.

Overseas voters

During this Parliamentary Election, the ECM had arranged polling stations for voters residing overseas, mainly in three different countries, namely, India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia, based on the voter population in these countries. For the polls held in these countries/polling stations, the election results were relayed directly to the Coordination Center, set up at the ECM, through online

mode. Such arrangement has been found to be not only effective in providing opportunities for the EMB officials to conduct polls in the place away from the home country but also is effective in bringing in higher voter turnout.

General Feedback and Recommendations

- The entire polling process was found to be peaceful and calm. The voters were found to be cooperative and disciplined in all respects.
- Setting up polling booths in prisons and allowing prisoners the right to vote was a commendable initiative.
- The voter turnout of about 75 % was a remarkable achievement.
- The high level of women's participation in the conduct of polls, as polling officials, was impressive.
- Facilitating overseas voters is noteworthy as such facilitation provides opportunities for inclusive voter participation in addition to valuable experiences that the ECM officials gained.
- The layout of the polling stations was voter-friendly. The arrangement of chairs inside the polling booths provided an opportunity for voters to conveniently take rest under the shade while waiting for their turn to cast their vote.
- It was worth appreciating that brailled ballots were made available for visually impaired voters at the polling stations for visually impaired voters.
- During the process of counting of votes after the closure of the poll, the ballots were segregated and stacked for respective candidates, based on the ballots marked against each of them. It is recommended that during the segregation process the marked ballots may be placed in separate boxes designated for each candidate. In addition to the convenience that such arrangement could provide for counting, it could prevent the ballots from getting mixed up.
- It was observed that a particular polling station catered to more than one polling booth. Possibility of merging more than one polling booth could be considered, depending on the number of voters, for effectiveness and cost-cutting measure in the future.

- Consider exploring the possibility of making arrangements for facilitating voters who are bedridden and those with long-term illnesses/hospitalized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2024 parliamentary elections of Maldives were free, fair and transparent. The entire electoral process was smooth, calm and secure, supplemented by the highest level of cooperation from the electorates including voters, party observers and representatives and the election officials. It is evident, from the fact that the election machinery that was put in place, that the Election Commission of Maldives had been efficient in educating and gaining the trust and confidence of the Maldivian population at large.

Acknowledgement

We, on behalf of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Election Commission of Maldives for inviting us to participate in the International Election Observers Programme, as the international observers for the 2024 Parliamentary Elections of the Maldives. The participation has provided an opportunity for us to learn the electoral best practices not only from the Maldivian experiences. This has also provided an invaluable platform for exchange of knowledge and experiences among the international participants from the different countries, instrumental for strengthening the electoral processes in their respective countries.

We are deeply grateful for the warm hospitality, including comfortable accommodation and highly palatable foods, during our stay at the Saii Lagoon located in the Crossroad Islands. We firmly believe that the knowledge we have gained from the first-hand observation of the conduct of elections in the Maldives will contribute positively to our own electoral processes in Bhutan and towards strengthening democracy in the region.